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ABSTRACT

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the most popular measures of personality available today and has been taken by over 12 million people. The MBTI has been successfully utilized for personal and marriage counseling, conflict and stress management, and understanding learning styles. It is perfect for the social work classroom because it does not measure sickness or pathology and the results are non-judgmental. The test can be quickly scored and the results have helped social work students to increase their self awareness. This workshop presents the background, purpose, and results of the MBTI and provides examples of how the MBTI can be utilized in social work classrooms. Ordering information and cautions in utilizing the MBTI are addressed to help social work educators consider utilizing it in their classrooms. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in the Social Work Classroom

A workshop conducted at the 2000
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Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in the Social Work Classroom

Abstract

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the most popular measures of personality available today and has been taken by over 12 million people (Type Resources, 1998). The MBTI has been successfully utilized for personal and marriage counseling, conflict and stress management, and understanding learning styles. The MBTI is perfect for the social work classroom because it does not measure sickness or pathology and the results are non-judgmental. The MBTI can be quickly scored and the results have helped social work students to increase their self-awareness (Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997). This workshop presents the background, purpose, and results of the MBTI and provides examples of how the MBTI can be utilized in social work classrooms. Ordering information and cautions in utilizing the MBTI are addressed to help social work educators consider utilizing the MBTI in their classrooms.

Title

Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in the Social Work Classroom

Introduction

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is perhaps one of the most popular measures of personality available today. Over 12 million people have taken the MBTI and it has been translated into over 30 languages (Type Resources, 1998). The MBTI has been utilized for personal, career and marriage counseling, conflict and stress management, team building and understanding managerial and learning styles (Fairhurst & Fairhurst, 1995; Keirsey, 1998; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1989; Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997; Pearman & Albritton, 1997). The MBTI was created to help individuals increase their self-awareness and it has been utilized successfully in higher education, business and industry, employee assistance programs, and social work education programs (Aviles, 2001; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1989; Fairhurst & Fairhurst, 1995; Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997). The MBTI has great potential for use in Social Work education because it does not measure sickness or pathology and the results are non-judgmental. The MBTI can be quickly scored, the results are easily understood and applied to life and workplace issues.

The MBTI is based on Carl Jung's theory of personality (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995). Jung believed individuals possessed four dichotomous dimensions of personality (figure one). The four personality dimensions involve how individuals interact with the world (e.g., **E**xtraversion versus **I**ntroversion), gather information (e.g., **S**ensing versus i**N**tuition), process information

(e.g., Thinking versus Feeling), and make decisions (e.g., Judging versus Perception). Isabel Myers-Briggs created the MBTI to help individuals recognize their preferences within the four personality dimensions. The preferences are often referred to as 'strengths' or 'gifts' in order to emphasize their non-judgmental nature.

Figure 1. Myers-Briggs Type Codes with Descriptions

MBTI Code	Description of MBTI Code
Extraversion Introversion	Prefers external world of people and things to internal world Prefers internal world of ideas and feelings to external world
Sensing iNtuition	Prefers to gather data with the five senses Prefers to gather data by hunches and sixth sense
Thinking Feeling	Prefers making decisions based on logic and objective analysis Prefers making decisions based on personal factors or subjective values
Judging Perception	Prefers to be decisive, planned and orderly Prefers to be flexible, adaptable, and spontaneous

Note. Adapted from Type Resources. (1998). MBTI Step 1 Professional Qualifying Workshop Notebook. Gaithersburg, MD: Type Resources Press.

Healthy individuals possess both aspects within each dichotomous personality dimension. However, individuals may utilize preferred aspects more often than non-preferred aspects. A common example to illustrate this point involves signing our names with our dominant hand. Although individuals can sign their names with their 'weak' hand, it may require greater concentration and feel uncomfortable compared to signing with the dominant hand. Similarly, healthy individuals possess all the personality

aspects suggested by Jung, but individuals may prefer using one aspect rather than another because it feels more comfortable or natural.

Considering personality preferences as strengths is consistent with the strength perspective in social work. Understanding the MBTI codes can help Social Work students to increase their self-awareness and perhaps increase their understanding of identifying and valuing differences in personality. The MBTI may also provide Social Work educators with another tool for teaching social work students to recognize and value client strengths and differences.

What the MBTI Measures

The MBTI measures or more properly, sorts, individuals based on preferences within four major dimensions of personality. The personality dimensions are examined briefly below. The Extraversion and Introversion scale of the MBTI measures an individual's source of energy and direction of focus in the world (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995; Type Resources, 1998). Individuals who prefer extraversion may have an outward focus directed to the world of people. Extraverts can be friendly, sociable, and be energized by interacting with others. Conversely, people preferring introversion may have an inward focus directed to their inner experience of the outer world. Individuals who prefer introversion may be quiet, introspective and perhaps intense or focused. Individuals who prefer introversion may enjoy privacy and become energized by contemplation, introspection, or activities involving concentration.

Social Work students in my courses easily begin to relate the MBTI to vocational satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g., an introvert may not enjoy working a busy

reception desk and an extravert may not enjoy working alone on a tedious detailed project). Students seem to quickly understand this personality dimension and frequently offer examples from home lives that demonstrate understanding of this MBTI code. Students often say they now understand why at the end of a hard week an extroverted partner may want to 'hit the town' while the introverted partner may want to relax at home. Alternatively, why some students prefer completing class projects on their own, while others prefer working with groups of students. The MBTI also can provide a framework for understanding workplace problems like the mental, physical and emotional exhaustion associated with burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). It is possible that employees who prefer extraversion may, for example, feel energized after working at a fast pace with people all day, while an employee who prefers introversion may feel drained or 'peopled out' from the same activities. Thus, burnout prevention methods must account for personality differences. For example, someone preferring extroversion may benefit from support groups or increased collegial contact while someone preferring introversion may benefit from time away from people in order to "recharge." Stress management techniques commonly include options that include either being with people or not, and suggest individuals consider the options they feel most comfortable with. For example, someone preferring extraversion may benefit from being with people to seek support, while some preferring introversion may benefit from spending time away from people for reflection and renewal. This MBTI code offers social work students a way to conceptualize what types of activities they find rejuvenating and conversely, what activities they experience as demanding.

The Sensing and Intuition scale of the MBTI measures ways of perceiving and acquiring information (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995; Type Resources, 1998). A preference for sensing can mean someone enjoys gathering facts and information with his/her five senses. Individuals who prefer sensing may like concrete, practical details and enjoy doing sequential or precise work. A preference for intuition can mean an individual may gather information with his/her sixth sense or with hunches and through seeing overall patterns and abstractions. Individuals who prefer intuition may enjoy considering possibilities and finding new or creative solutions to problems.

Students who prefer sensing may enjoy making their work function like a well-oiled machine, while students preferring intuition may enjoy doing things creatively or differently. With this aspect, students often give examples of information gathering prior to decision making (e.g., the sensing partner gathered all the facts while the intuitive partner just 'knew' what choice to make). Employees who prefer intuition may easily see the overall picture or grand scheme while sensing employees may easily see details. Social work students often help clients to improve their decision-making skills. Individuals who prefer sensing often are able to collect relevant facts, information and details, but may have difficulty actually making the decision. Alternatively, individuals who prefer intuition may make decisions based on what "feels right" but perhaps without collecting all the available data and weighing the evidence. Thus, an individual who prefers sensing and has collected all the relevant information about a decision but still feels 'stuck' may be encouraged to consider what "feels right" regarding a decision in order to help them utilize their intuition. Conversely, individuals who prefer intuition but

fail to gather all relevant data might be encouraged to collect additional information and weigh the evidence before decision making instead of deciding solely based on intuition.

The Thinking and Feeling scale of the MBTI measures ways of evaluating information (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995; Type Resources, 1998). A thinking preference can mean an individual may prefer to make decisions based on facts, evidence and objective analysis. Students who prefer thinking may focus on fairness over compassion and may be critical of ideas without intending to. Individuals with a preference for feeling may first consider how facts, evidence and decisions will affect others. Individuals who prefer feeling often enjoy harmony in personal and work relationships and may value compassion over objectivity. Students who prefer thinking, in contrast, may value objectivity and truth over compassion.

Students quickly note that this aspect involves, in their words, "the head & the heart." Students who are in field placement and prefer feeling often note that for them, how something is said is as important as what is said. Alternatively, students who prefer thinking may respond more to the message than it's delivery (e.g., "say what's on your mind and don't pretty it up."). For this code, students often describe workplace conflicts involving feedback. A feeling employee (or partner in a relationship) may experience objective feedback as caustic while a supervisor (or partner) who prefers thinking may view objective feedback as simply the "truth." Students often share examples of conflicts that occur in families or relationships that involve the MBTI codes of thinking and feeling. The potential for examples that demonstrate either conflict or cooperation with this code are probably endless.

The Judging and Perception scale of the MBTI measures a preference for making decisions and ways in which individuals prefer to interact with their external environment (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995; Type Resources, 1998). Individuals who prefer judging may enjoy structure, order, specific plans and decisiveness in their work and personal lives. People with a preference for judging also may enjoy working on projects to their completion. People who prefer perceiving, in contrast, may enjoy being flexible, adaptable, spontaneous, and working on several open-ended projects as opposed to one single project. People who prefer judging often enjoy routines and standard operating procedures for completing tasks, while individuals who prefer perceiving may find routines "stifling" and prefer to work creatively and do routine tasks in different ways.

The judging and perceiving code often manifests in workflow and time management issues. For example, students who prefer judging may complete projects ahead of schedule to avoid stress. Students who prefer perceiving may delay project completion to keep all options open and may enjoy the stress and excitement of making a last minute deadline. Conflicts with this code often manifest when students work on group projects. Students who prefer judging often want to begin work immediately while the students who prefer perceiving may prefer to work more intensely at the last minute. Consider the potential workplace conflict when a supervisor who prefers perceiving constantly gives projects due at the last minute to an employee whom prefers judging (e.g., "stop setting me up for failure!"). Or, when a supervisor who prefers judging wants progress reports from a perceiving employee who likes to begin projects when deadlines approach (e.g., "stop micro-managing me!"). As a social work educator who

prefers judging, I normally have all exams, quizzes and course materials prepared and copied before each semester begins in order to avoid the stress of creating exams the night before needed. However, social work educators who prefer perceiving may enjoy writing exams the night before needed and experience it as exciting rather than stressful.

As Isabel Myers-Briggs noted, MBTI preferences are non-judgmental and individuals may be required to utilize all the preferences in certain situations. However, conflict or dissatisfaction may occur if people must continually utilize their least preferred or least developed functions. Isabel Myers-Briggs also noted that in order to make fuller use of all our potential strengths individuals should practice using the non-preferred personality aspect within each of the four personality dimensions.

Cautions in utilizing the MBTI

A caution when utilizing the MBTI is not to equate personality preference with skill levels. For example, an employee with a strong preference for extraversion may enjoy working at a busy reception desk but not be highly skilled at it. Similarly, a student or client who relies on their intuition has no guarantee that their intuition is correct. In addition, a perceiver who prefers doing work at the last minute has no guarantee that doing so will result in their best work.

Another caution is that identifying conflicts with the MBTI does not resolve them. For example, consider an agency where a perceiving manager constantly gives last minute projects that have sat on a desk for weeks to a judging worker who needs time to do thorough work. Should the solution involve having the perceiving manager distribute work tasks earlier to take advantage of the strengths of his/her judging

employee, or should the judging employee learn to work faster? Social Work students may face similar situations if working with people who have conflicts with the MBTI code of thinking and feeling. For example, should a partner who prefers thinking need to be more compassionate, or should the partner who prefers feeling need to be more 'thick skinned?' The MBTI can be a great tool for helping social work students to characterize such conflicts since problems must be identified before they can be resolved.

Resources

The MBTI shows adequate reliability with at least .83 on split half scores and .71 on test-retest scores over a two-week period (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985). Validity of the MBTI was established by correlating MBTI scores with results from several personality measures and vocational interest inventories. Also to establish validity, significant correlations were found between MBTI results, behaviors indicative of MBTI constructs and, with a respondent's self-assessment of his/her MBTI type (Briggs-Myers & McCaully, 1985; Campbell & Hansen, 1981; Devito, 1985; Wheelwright, Wheelwright, & Buehler, 1964).

The MBTI takes about 25 minutes to complete and includes 126 multiple choice type items written at the 7th grade reading level. The MBTI is available from Consulting Psychologists Press (800-624-1765; http://www.mbti.com/). An MBTI preview kit (form M) costs about $22.00. A social work educator can manually score the MBTI or send it to Consulting Psychologists Press for computer scoring. I utilize manual scoring of the MBTI in my social work courses and distribute the results to my students. Social work students have the option deciding whether to share their codes with the class or not. The preview kit also includes reproducible materials for distribution in class.

Conclusion

The MBTI is a wonderful potential tool for Social Work educators because the MBTI offers social work students a way to conceptualize preferences within four personality dimensions as strengths. The MBTI also offers social work students a way to conceptualize personality preferences without involving sickness or pathology. Social work educators can utilize the MBTI to help students to increase their self-awareness of their own personality preferences. The MBTI results can help to generate class discussion of many issues related to client problems, conflicts and intervention methods. Social work educators who use the MBTI will find it a useful tool in the social work classroom.

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